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SUBJECT: VICE PRESIDENT KHAMA TAKES HEAT FROM MPS

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Botswana's just-concluded parliamentary session contained some embarrassing but revealing moments for Vice President Ian Khama. His contributions to the National Assembly were brought into question by MPs asking why he does not report to the legislature. Others complained that implementation of projects by the ministries, which Khama officially oversees, is poor. Khama struck a populist note as the session concluded, however, by encouraging the MPs to "exercise restraint" as they considered a bill to increase their own compensation. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Vice President Khama, who will replace President Mogae in March 2008 if Mogae does not retire earlier, represents an unfolding enigma. When Khama joined active politics in 1998, he was a popular but puzzling figure - a single, middle-aged man who abstained from alcohol and spoke barely comprehensible Setswana. His almost immediate departure for a twelve-month leave of absence intensified the public's curiosity. Although surveys and anecdotal evidence indicate that Khama is well-liked and respected by Batswana, suspicions about his leadership style persist among the political elite.

KHAMA SHOULD REPORT TO PARLIAMENT

3. (SBU) The debate over the budget revealed some concern about Vice President Khama's role as Member of Parliament. Specially-elected MP Botsalo Ntuane caused a stir when he asked why Khama did not report to the National Assembly. Khama previously held the portfolio for the Ministry of Presidential Affairs and Public Administration but in 2001 surrendered that position to oversee implementation of national development plans across all ministries. Since then, he has yet to report to the National Assembly on his progress. Indeed, it is common knowledge that Khama rarely attends sessions of parliament, and almost never speaks. If the President and the Ministers report, asked Ntuane, why not the Vice President? Ntuane told Emboffs on March 22 that when a fellow MP rose to echo his sentiments, the Vice President stood up laughing and walked out. Other MPs indirectly criticized the Vice President's performance by complaining about poor implementation by the line ministries.

INSUFFICIENT CONSULTATION ABOUT LIQUOR REGULATIONS

4. (U) Ntuane again provoked controversy by tabling a motion to hold in abeyance the introduction of new regulations severely limiting sales of alcohol. The regulations, which would have significantly scaled back the

hours of operation for bars, could have eliminated jobs at a time when they are increasingly hard to find, he asserted. A majority of parliamentarians from across party lines rallied to support Ntuanne, asserting that the rules were drafted without sufficient consultation with various stakeholders. Ultimately, the government backed down and withdrew the regulations. (Comment: Many believe that Khama, a staunch teetotaler, was behind the new regulations. Although Khama voiced support for their adoption, the government has denied that the proposed reforms originated with him. Churches overwhelmingly favor them. End comment.)

KHAMA CROSSES MPS OVER THEIR COMPENSATION

15. (U) During the final week of the parliamentary session, the Vice President surprised many when he rose to comment on a proposed bill to increase compensation to MPs. Khama encouraged the parliamentarians to "exercise restraint" in this matter, enumerated their various allowances and observed that the people they represent would like to see their own circumstances improve as well. Reportedly, he completely disregarded efforts of other legislators to intervene with points of clarification and, after yielding the floor, left the Assembly. In a previous parliamentary debate on the same subject, Khama had referred to MPs seeking to increase their compensation as "vultures."

16. (U) The majority dissented with the Vice President and supported the bill. MP and former cabinet minister Boyce Sebetela rejected Khama's advice, pointing out that Khama had expressed no such scruples when the government lavished benefits upon him, such as an allowance for renovating his house or free personal use of government-owned aircraft. He

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went on to attack Khama's consistent absence from the National Assembly and refusal to engage other MPs in debate as undemocratic.

KHAMA TO HOLD SERIES OF TOWN HALL MEETINGS

17. (U) The Vice President's Office announced that Khama plans to attend a series of kgotla (a traditional village assembly place akin to a town hall) meetings in each of Botswana's parliamentary constituencies. This started with recent visits to the remote Ngamiland and Tswapong areas. Particularly in the light of past criticism of President Mogae for preferring to travel abroad than to the kgotla, this announcement appears to be one more measure to prepare the Vice President for assuming the presidency on a strong footing.

18. (U) The March 29 edition of the Botswana Gazette contained a rare interview with Khama, in which he defended his record as a parliamentarian and as the Vice President. He deflected accusations of a dictatorial disposition and emphasized instead the time he spends on constituent services. He also confirmed that the government is considering the creation of a national intelligence agency (reftel).

COMMENT

19. (SBU) As the March 2008 succession date approaches, Vice President Khama is gradually assuming a larger profile on Botswana's political scene. The debate over the budget highlighted some of the popular concerns about the Vice President, e.g. lack of accountability and consultation with parliament and the public, and sense of entitlement. The fact that MPs of his own party did not shy away from open disagreement with or even criticism of him shows the extent to which democracy in Botswana is alive and well.

CANAVAN